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Watching the Spooks

Leaders of the House Select Committee on Intelligence have hinted that they want to know virtually everything the CIA does. *No more spook chicanery*, they seem to say, *we want to know all!* The implication is that the organization has run amok and that Congress must rein it in before secret agents begin staging raids on innocents abroad.

Such arguments are nothing new, really, for the House or for the United States. Americans, including the Founding Fathers, traditionally have kept most of the nation's power away from generals or organizations that conduct military or paramilitary maneuvers. That's a sound instinct, if other nations' histories are any guide. Yet the House move, led by Edward Boland and Lee Hamilton, does contain a relatively new twist to the old suspicion. Rep. Boland and some of his colleagues despise any exertion of American power anywhere and have expressed hostility to covert activity in general.

Although the CIA already has cut a classified deal that requires the agency to notify the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence of any covert action authorized by the president, the House Select Committee may want more. Its staff has recommended nine other reporting stipulations — notification of operations that involve non-CIA personnel or equipment, of changes in a particular operation's objectives, of activities that might alter a nation's form of government, and so on. The general gist of these regulations is that the House wants to know most particulars of most operations, presumably to prevent spooks from sinning.

Now, much of the debate about the regula-

tions is hyperbolic in the sense that the CIA will circumvent the reporting provisions whenever possible. Nevertheless, congressional intervention hamstringing the agency in the 1970s and helped make possible such embarrassments as the takeover of the Tehran embassy. The present tug-of-war concerns the agency's attempt to recapture some of its former independence from a House that doesn't want to surrender its access to the agency.

The House has a point. Its members certainly have a duty to prevent spies and spymasters from behaving stupidly or recklessly. Nevertheless, the politicians must use a light touch. The committee's stipulations could impose such exhaustive reporting requirements on the CIA that the agency would lose what operational credibility it now possesses. Foreign governments wouldn't trade information for fear that some publicity-hungry politician might divulge sensitive and important secrets. The agency itself would be exposed and therefore ineffectual, and important covert information would flow only one way — out of the West, toward Moscow.

If the House select committee wants to monitor the agency's activities, then, it should be prepared to offer a reasonable *quid pro quo*. In exchange for better reporting by the CIA, the House should impose very strict penalties — including prison terms — upon those who leak classified information from or about the agency. That way the intelligence community will know that the new regulations are designed to help the House monitor appropriations rather than to cripple the CIA.